

INSPIRING, from page 10

her 800-mile move to the Windy City.

Fraser is undoubtedly a talented dancer, but her talent could not have surfaced if she had let her condition be a barrier. Instead, she let her scoliosis be a characteristic or a trait that describes her.

"In the past 10 years, scoliosis has not stopped me once," she said proudly. "After I was diagnosed, I found ways to make it work. If choreographers or teachers came to work with us, my diagnosis was never something that held me back. If there was tricky choreography that scared me, I still would try it in the back of the room. I never let scoliosis hold me back like I was 'disabled.'"

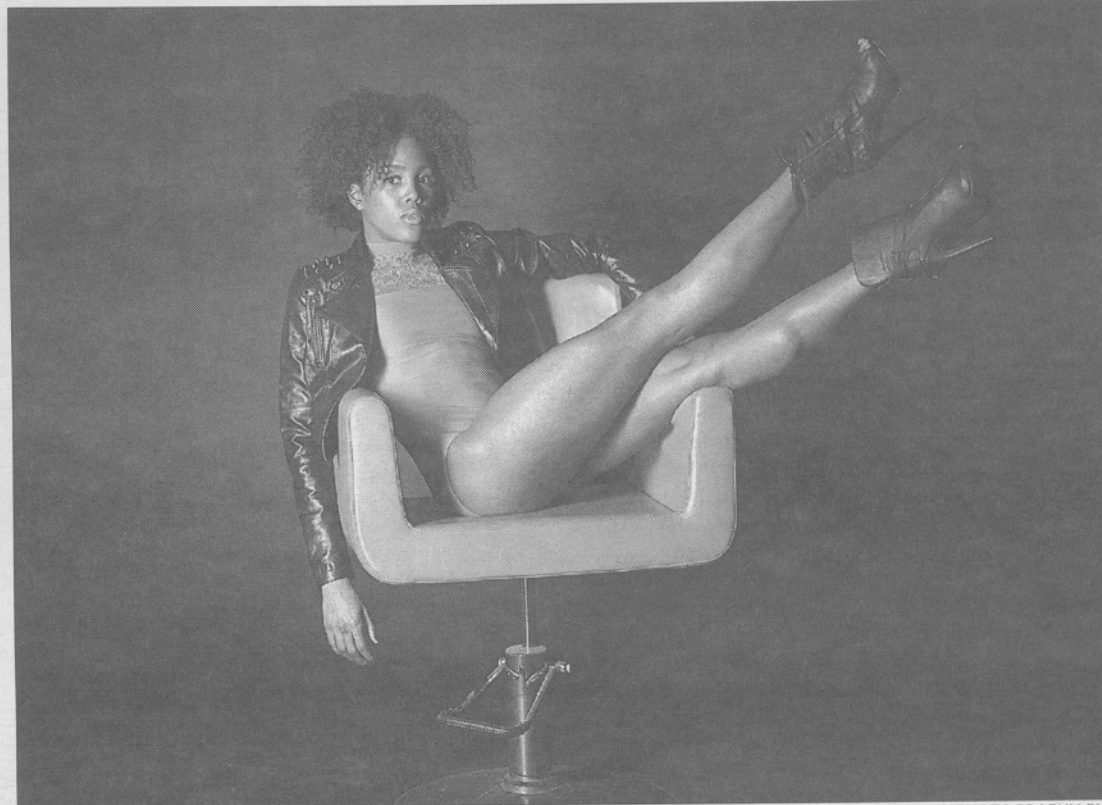
Fraser's stress of and distaste for that final word is significant to her story. Her refusal to label herself as "disabled" was a leap toward empowerment among many other choices she made during her journey to establish herself as a professional dancer.

"The most empowering part of my journey is that I was able to persevere without getting the surgery for my condition," she explained. "The research that I did and the mentors that I had in my life reminded me that it wasn't the end of the world. I broke down and I cried. I was fearful that my career would never exist, but what if I had given up?"

If she had given up, she would not have spent the past 13 years wearing braces, keeping countless appointments, training until she hurt, healing the best she could to do it all again the next day, and finally dancing for her dream company. Because she chose not to give up, she serves as a role model for others of all walks of life.

"My director (Nick Pupillo of Visceral Dance Chicago) is big on each of us being individuals," Fraser said. "None of us look the same, and he loves that. We were all from different places. We are dancers who are unique and we have different traits and different personalities. We bring another sense of diversity to Chicago. Someone in the audience can connect with at least one of us."

When Fraser is not gliding across the



PHOTOGRAPHY BY NOHEMI MORAN FOR NOMEI

Paige Fraser went against her doctor's advice to undergo surgery and instead learned to adapt to the exaggerated curvature of her spine.

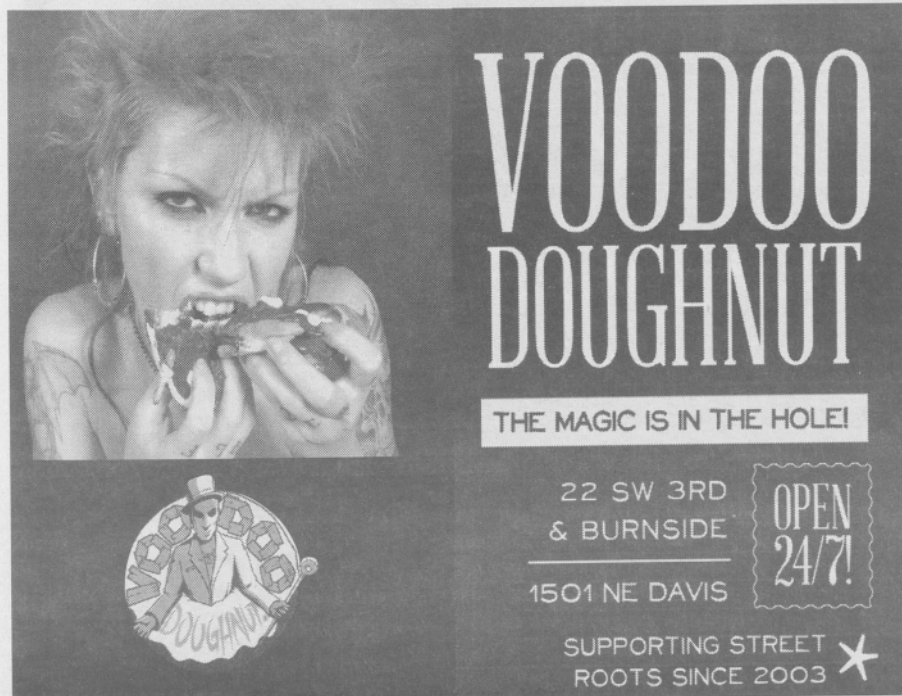
stage, she's teaching the next generation of dancers at Visceral. Now in her third season with the company, she helps young dancers perfect their pirouettes, promenades, lunges, and stags, but she also shows them that not all bodies learn to perform the moves in the same way. Through her coaching and her Intel campaign, Fraser makes it a point to educate and lift up those around her.

She offered a word of advice to anyone facing barriers to their goals, regardless of their able-bodiedness. "It boils down to believing in yourself even when it's difficult," she said. "It takes time; it takes preparation; and it takes hard work. I want my story to inspire and empower other women, other women of color, other dancers, and other dancers with disabilities. You don't have to stop dancing."

Courtesy of StreetWise / INSP.ngo



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